A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]

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Chapter 32

Asajj Ventress stepped out onto the hotel balcony, and let the warm, wet breeze coming off the aqua-green and crystal clear ocean wash over her. The late morning sun was bright and hot; not a cloud could be seen in the hazy blue sky. The beach was already packed with vacationers taking it easy and locals doing what they did best, a rainbow of colors on top of the white sand.

"Yep," she said, tasting the salt of the sea in the air, and something more. Zeltron pheromones. They left the faintest tingling in her nose, and a warm excitement in her blood. "Definitely Zeltros."

"So, that's the guy?" Ahsoka Tano asked, after joining her on the hotel balcony. She nodded down at the only person who matched their charge's description, a big Nautolan man relaxing in the hotel pool, seven levels below. "Marko Riberre, what a piece of work. But Zeltros must be a great place to be a Nautolan... so much humidity you're breathing water, and pheromones everywhere."

"Not to mention, the company..." Asajj spied two Zeltrons approaching the Nautolan. "Let's go meet him before he's too occupied."

Riberre grinned when he saw them, now in a deck chair by the water's edge. "Ladies!" he called. "Over here." The Nautolan was green-skinned and dark-eyed, like so many of his kind, dressed in an indecently tight pair of swimming shorts and nothing else save for a gold medallion of some sorts, leaving his well-muscled body on display for all to see. He enjoyed showing off, Asajj could feel the smugness through the Force already.

"Marko Riberre," said Asajj. "I can't say it's a complete pleasure to meet you, but you *are* paying us, so I can't say I'm displeased to see you."

"Is my reputation that poor?" asked the Nautolan, grinning. "When I hired the great assassin Ventress, I didn't think she'd be bringing such a delicious companion. Enjoying the Zeltros atmosphere already, perhaps?"

Tano's face scrunched up in disgust. "Absolutely not! We are *not* like... like *that!*" she said, her outer fury masking her inner embarrassment. "And call me *delicious* again, see what happens!"

"She looks sweet, but she's actually spicy," said Riberre, turning his dazzling smile on Asajj, leaving Tano to fume silently. "I like your taste in friends, Ventress. Since there's two of you now, I suppose you'll want to be paid double?"

"Yeah," said Ventress. "You won't get better security for your credits. Nothing short of the whole Jedi Temple is getting through us."

"I'll take your word for it. Let it never be said that Marko Riberre is stingy!" He waved forward a Zeltron girl who had been lurking nearby. Her mind wasn't totally focused on festivity, unlike many of the other locals working the tourist districts. Her skin was a soft pink, her hair a deep maroon, and the calm gaze of a professional businesswoman locked on Asajj and Tano didn't match her Zeltron party-girl outfit of tall heeled boots, tiny shorts and a glittering top that left her stomach bare.

"These the girls, boss?" asked the Zeltron, looking them over.

"Asajj Ventress and her plus one," said Riberre, sipping at an obnoxiously neon green-colored drink. "What do you think?"

"They look tough," said the Zeltron. "The Togruta is on edge, she's not used to this kind of atmosphere, and she's not used to working with the other one. Is she Rattataki or Dathomiran? I can't tell. She's much more at ease. I think we could have fun together."

"I'll let you figure out," said Asajj, crossing her arms. "So, who is this?" she asked Riberre.

"I'm Naka," said the Zeltron. "The boss's personal driver, and your guide to Ibisa."

"I'm not leaving Seaside Serenity until the big meet," said Riberre, nodding to the glamorous hotel looming above the pool. "But you'll need to be familiar with the route I'll be taking. Naka here will show you around."

"How about we see the city from inside?" suggested Tano, squinting up at the sun. "It's not even ten hundred hours and it's sweltering."

"How about a speeder?" asked Naka, putting her hands on their shoulders and guiding them away from the pool. "So, you're a military girl," she said, dropping her voice down low. "Ten hundred hours, that's military speak."

"Ex-military," said Tano. "I'm a private citizen now."

"Yes, I see," Naka said, turning to Asajj. "And are you *the* Asajj Ventress?"

"Possibly," said Asajj.

"The hair really threw me off, but imagining you bald... yeah, you're her, for sure. I liked you better without the hair, honestly," said Naka. "You had a very exotic kind of beauty. Tantalizing, to us Zeltrons!"

"Thanks, sweetie," said Asajj, "but I'm not interested."

"Worth a shot, you never know what aliens might be into," Naka said, with an apologetic smile. "Alright, back to business! Let me show you around Ibisa. I've known a lot of off-worlders over the years, working for Riberre, and I've always been able to show them a good time. Usually. There was one really stubborn guy this one time, but I digress..."

Fortunately Naka's speeder was enclosed and cooled, offering relief from the growing heat and humidity of tropical Zeltros's day. But there was never a relief from the pheromones when a Zeltron was around. That was something two somewhat-disciplined warriors could handle. Without their respective Sith and Jedi training, though, Naka would have been very distracting. Asajj sat up front as Naka drove through downtown Ibisa and pointed out all the prime ambush locations and sniper spots. There was something off-putting by seeing such a cheery-looking girl talking about rocket launchers and fragmentation warheads, but Asajj liked that. She didn't play for that team, so to speak, but at the very least, Naka was shaping up to be an ally she could bear.

Meanwhile, Tano sat in the back of the speeder, lost in her own thoughts as she often had been since their trip to Kalee with Shaak Ti. The failed padawan needed money now, that's why she was here, but her heart was still very much that of a Jedi's. Asajj could sympathize, though she'd never admit it. Twice in her life now, she'd been lost and abandoned. She knew what it was like to lose people she'd trusted and looked up to. That Tano hadn't gone rushing off to the dark side the moment she heard about Skywalker's death was a testament to her strength of will. Asajj had failed that test once. If she hadn't, she'd never have been caught up in this stupid war.

At least there's no war here, she thought, looking out onto the streets of Ibisa. Alien tourists and Zeltrons mingled, happy as could be, enjoying the easy-going atmosphere of the city. Asajj enjoyed action, but this place wasn't bad at all. With any luck, they'd see Marko Riberre to his meeting with the Hutt representative, and get payment for enjoying Zeltros and warding off occasional pedestrians. *Easy!*

"It's you and me now, Komara," Xiss said, a dozen paces away on *Encounter*'s hangar deck. "Those droids aren't gonna save you."

Grievous's two magnaguards looked in impassively, the lone witnesses to their imminent battle, under direct orders from the cyborg himself to observe and record the duel. As far as Murshida and Mofuwa knew, both girls were asleep in their cabins. Voyan was at the Minntooine Naval Depot retrieving his last few worldly belongings from storage, Alize was in the mess hall trying to set up a full shadowfeed suite for her soap operas, and R8 was charging his batteries. They were alone.

Esera could feel the roiling storm of emotion within Xiss. She felt angry, betrayed, abandoned, resentful, and most of all, fearful. Her thoughts dwelt on the consequences of failure, and the dreadful nerve-staple, the dagger dangling a centimeter above her throat. But her contempt for Esera burned hot enough that even her fear of punishment would not hold her back now. *Weak, cowardly, useless, pathetic,* Xiss thought, with such openness and clarity Esera could listen in without even trying. *Why you? Why did you get to live? Why did someone as small and insignificant as you end up with such power and freedom? Why did someone as inept and timid as you get to keep your master?*

Envy, that feeling dwelt deepest in Xiss's heart. Master Glaive had been beheaded by Asajj Ventress on the moon of Naboo, years ago. Xiss had never recovered in the short time between then and her supposed death on Jabiim. But Esera's master was dead too, now. He hadn't even died quickly and honorably in battle, he'd spent three days dying from his wounds. Esera had been at his side every moment, powerless to save him. *You're right, I was weak and useless,* she thought, not knowing if Xiss would hear her or not. *But not anymore.*

There was no room for pity in Esera's heart, not for Xiss, not today. She shared in the Zeltron's anger and resentment. *You humiliated me in front of everyone, back at the Temple. And now you've humiliated me in front of the only two people whose respect I need.* Without respect, Grievous would never take her seriously, and Voyan would only obey her because the military hierarchy demanded it. *I've been a laughing stock my whole life,* she thought, *but not anymore.*

Revenge was not the Jedi way. Esera was not a Jedi. There was a fire in her blood, one she'd been too afraid to ever acknowledge, taught all her life that emotions were things to be wary of. Master Callo had promised to tell her why he thought that was wrong, when she was older, but now he was gone. *I am just a woman,* thought Esera, *I am not a great warrior or a skilled general or a wise master. But this is who I am, my own brother said as much, and I will not fear myself! I've had it with being pushed around!* Esera remembered every fight she'd lost, all those hours of being trashed by Grievous in their practice matches, losing her hand to Tano and nearly being impaled by Aspar. She had always been the loser. *But not anymore.*

The time for payback had come, against Xiss, against all of them.

"Didn't they say to control your emotions?" Xiss asked her, unzipping her jacket.

"I accept this emotion as a part of me," said Esera. "But that does not mean I am its slave."

"Such noble words," the Zeltron said. She shrugged off her jacket, and took up her lightsaber. Xiss was taller than Esera, her reach longer, her midriff toned, her shoulders broad, her arms strong; she was so lean that Esera could her muscles expanding and contracting beneath her skin with each move she made. This woman hardly had a gram of body fat on her, and she could have given Voyan a serious challenge for slimmest person the ship. Kilo for kilo, Xiss had every physical advantage she could have over Esera. Their battle would not be entirely physical, though. The Zeltron was off-balance, distracted, worried, and anxious. The Force was not strong in her.

"What are you feeling so smug about, you little stump of a girl?" asked Xiss, sneering at her. "You're gonna be even shorter when I'm done with you, Komara."

"A twig like you won't even reach this stump's footsteps," Esera said, igniting her saber.

Xiss wasted no more time on words, she turned on her own blade and ran straight at Esera, with a wrathful cry. Like a storm of anger and aggression, Xiss charged in, swinging her lightsaber wildly. Half a year ago, Esera would have faltered right there. But today, she let her feet take her away and around the Zeltron, lightsaber in her left hand probing outwards, seeking a hole in Xiss's defense, her useless right hand behind held out of the way her back. Just the way Grievous had taught her.

All Xiss could do was roar in rage as Esera refused to stand still and be hit. The Zeltron's anger burned like a bright flame in the Force, the dark side's shadow closed in around her. *This must be how it looked to Ahsoka,* thought Esera, remembering her own dark side experience. Xiss flailed around, almost out of control, any sense of form or style to her fighting disintegrating into a melee of mindless bloodlust. Esera got several glancing hits on her, singeing her skin and leaving burns on her clothes. This just made her enemy angrier.

That's right, get mad, thought Esera, even as she battled to stay in control of her own anger. "What did I tell you, Xiss?" she taunted. "You can't even touch me."

The Zeltron screamed again, throwing her hand out to push over Esera through the Force. But Esera had already thrown herself clear. She responded in kind, reaching out and yanking her enemy by the ankle, sending her crashing face-first into the hangar deck. Esera went for the finishing strike, but Xiss got her lightsaber up in time, blood streaming from her nose, a feral rage in her eyes. She was *strong*; one blow, even fighting against gravity over such a short distance, forced Esera away from her, leaving her arm tingling.

Xiss howled in wordless fury, swinging this way and that, showers of sparks went up as her blade scorched the deck when she missed. *Look at you!* Esera thought, as she leapt backwards and let the Zeltron go stumbling away from her. *You thought I was pathetic? You're running around like an out-of-control animal!*

If Xiss heard her thoughts, she didn't bother responding. She gasped for breath, she was bruised and bloodied and burned, her focus was gone, her presence in the Force wilting, even as the dark side tried to keep its grip on her. Once more, she ran blindly forwards, saber held pointed at Esera. Esera saw her attack before it even happened, and she was already in motion. A push of the Force on Xiss's blade gave her just enough room to get inside her defenses. Esera rammed her shoulder into the Zeltron's chest, sending her crashing to the deck, and she brought her blade down on Xiss's neck.

The two women were frozen for a moment. Xiss's lightsaber rolled away from her, her eyes locked on the green blade a millimeter from slashing her throat open. Both were panting and drenched in sweat, but Xiss hadn't gotten a single hit in on Esera.

"How does it feel?" Esera asked her, between deep breaths. "How does it feel to be the one looking up from the ground? How does it feel to be powerless?"

"What are you waiting for?" Xiss asked, putting on a brave face as her anger deserted her and fear filled the void. "Go on, kill me."

Wouldn't I like to? Esera thought. *Wouldn't that be so satisfying?* For a few moments, yes, it would be. But Esera could look further into the future than that.

"No, I won't," said Esera. "You're going to live with this shame. You'll live every day knowing you weren't strong enough to win. And maybe one day you'll realize there's more to strength than mere power." She turned off her lightsaber, and walked away, exposing her back to Xiss. The Zeltron didn't move. Grievous's magnaguards fell in behind her, feet clanking on the deck.

Here it comes, Esera thought, once she'd reached the privacy of her quarters.

A magnaguard placed a holoprojector on the floor, and up sprang the blue image of Grievous. "Komara!" he barked.

"Yes?" she sighed, wiping the sweat from her brow with a towel.

"What was it I told you, before I sent you to Naboo?"

"That it would be worth it to lose a thousand times to you if it meant winning a real fight once," Esera said, looking glumly at the cyborg.

"And didn't you say that'd never happen?" asked Grievous.

"I said that'd be the day you forgave the Jedi," Esera told him. "I'm expecting that now."

"Bah!" Grievous waved his hand dismissively. "Don't change the subject on me! I was right, you were wrong. You *can* defend yourself. You *can* win. And you did it without becoming another Ventress or Krell. And you did it without- what was it you said? Becoming a heartless, soulless machine like me?" Grievous tilted his head, his life-sized hologram looming over her.

Not all the blood in Esera's cheeks was from exertion, now. "Fine," she muttered. "You were right, I was wrong. I worked hard and improved myself. Are you happy?"

"Exceedingly," said Grievous. "Now stop being a moody teenager and be proud of what you have done!"

"I'm seventeen, Grievous, I have the right to be a moody teenager."

"Your records say you'll be eighteen in less than three weeks. I expect the moodiness to be gone by then." The cyborg folded his arms behind his back, and looked off at who knew what. "I arranged this meeting between you and Xiss as punishment for your insolence towards me recently. Instead of wallowing in self-pity and shame, you challenged her, you applied everything I taught you, and won all by yourself. Count yourself lucky, Komara. There are very few beings in this galaxy who can escape my wrath like that."

"Wait, you didn't think I'd fight her?" she asked, more than a little offended.

"Didn't *you* tell me you weren't a fighter?" Grievous asked back, a mocking look on what little was left of his face, before returning to his serious state. "Komara, I cannot stress this enough. You are not helpless, you are not weak, you are not useless. Never let me hear you denigrating yourself as such ever again. There is strength in your heart. You will never need any other."

With that, the transmission cut out, and the magnaguards retreated to outside Esera's quarters. Esera was left standing, staring dumbly at the space where Grievous had been. *Did those words really just come out of his vocoder?* she asked herself. *Did Grievous just say all that? To me?*

"What is this galaxy coming to?" Esera asked to no one. She needed a shower, and a drink.

Against a Jedi knight ten years her senior, Esera Komara had failed. That was to be expected. Against a failed padawan her own age, even one physically stronger, Grievous had expected victory. And Komara had delivered. He'd seen a serious change in the girl, since she'd returned from her Naboo adventure with the Sith infiltrator and a new Skakoan friend. She was losing touch with the Jedi principles, and discovering her own. Even if they were similar. To say that he was pleased with her performance was an understatement. A strange, almost vicarious sense of joy filled his cold heart when he'd seen her take down Xiss. That weak, scared little girl he'd cornered in the Congress building had grown into a not-as-weak and courageous young woman, in such a short time.

And an angry young woman at that, Grievous thought. Komara had always been temperamental, but she'd been morose and despondent before. Since her trip to visit her family, her blood seemed to be running twice as hot. But she wasn't out of control, like Xiss or Ventress. Komara was the mistress of her own self, and she was learning to trust herself more, it seemed. *This investment has paid off, tenfold.* Grievous didn't like using the language of the bankers, but it was all that fit here. He'd taken a chance by allying with an abandoned Jedi girl. She could have so easily fallen into darkness like Ventress, but

she didn't. She could have remained passively aboard *Invisible Hand* like another one of his crew, waiting for orders, but she didn't. She even could have stayed silent and saved herself from his displeasure when he crossed lines she didn't like crossed, but she didn't.

Initiative is the most important quality in a subordinate. And she has lots of it. His hands-off approach was delivering results he'd never imagined. And it was going to deliver results again, soon. One way or another, Komara would make Zeltros a non-factor in the defense of Umbara. She wouldn't let herself fail as long as she thought Grievous would destroy the planet otherwise. Whether or not he would, if she failed, remained to be seen.

But with one underling's success, came another underling's failure. Grievous's musing were soon interrupted by a supply conflict between two garrisons in the Sluis sector that had somehow made it all the way up to the highest possible level of arbitration: him. *At least it's not civilian politics,* he thought, eyes pouring over the spreadsheets, making changes to the documents directly from his implanted wireless transmitter. War was won on supply lines, and Grievous had no qualms about seeing to them himself when the situation called for it.

"Do you feel the burn, Master Kenobi?" asked a youngling, jogging up the Temple stairs after him.

"I feel it!" huffed Obi-wan.

"Come on, Master! Ten more meters!" another youngling cheered.

Obi-wan summoned up an ounce more of willpower, and propelled himself up the final stretch, almost stumbling when he reached the Temple gates. "I did it!" he gasped.

"You did it!" the younglings screamed. Someone offered him a canteen of water, he took it.

"Never let anyone keep you tied up in a dungeon for two months straight," he told the children, between deep breaths. "Muscular atrophy is a terrible thing."

Later, after the younglings went to dinner, Shaak Ti found him sitting at the top of the Temple steps, watching the sunset and enjoying the cool breeze. "Back to normal, Obi-wan?" she asked, joining him.

"As best I can be," Obi-wan said. "I'm not as young as I was."

"You're telling me..." sighed Shaak Ti. "Your physical therapy seems to have gone along nicely. But what of your other assignment?"

"The Komara investigation?" he asked. "It's tougher than it sounded."

"Oh?"

"We don't keep records of who was friends with who, as a youngling. We don't track personal relationships or disputes. That's all from memories." Obi-wan tapped his temple. "And in here is the only place to find those. Once the one holding those memories is gone, so are they... unless they made a holocron, but who's going to make a holocron about life as a youngling ten years ago?"

"I see," said Shaak Ti.

"I was able to contact the clone commander she worked with, he didn't have much to say that we hadn't learned from young Aspar already. They both agree she was quiet, sensitive, moody, prone to self-doubt... And what little I've been able to dig up here indicates everyone she knew when she was young has since died in the war," Obi-wan said. He frowned, and looked up at the sky. "An entire generation of Jedi is dying out there..."

"Everyone who made it as a Jedi, that is," Shaak Ti said. "Komara struggled with... everything, really. Olor told me all about her difficulties. If he hadn't taken her as his apprentice then she would have been put into the Service Corps."

Oh, Obi-wan thought. "Of course! The Service Corps! I'll bet there's people there who knew her."

"You should cross-reference your findings with Service Corps records," Shaak Ti said, with a little smile on her face. "Too many of us forget our less-powerful brothers and sisters doing the thankless work that lets us all live the way we do."

"Sad... but indisputably true," said Obi-wan. "A lot of the knights Olor Callo associated with are dead now, too. He and his type were not cut out for fighting. Despite what Grievous says about me, they were the real negotiators. I respect them for it."

"Olor always liked to think of himself as a peacemaker, not a peacekeeper," Shaak Ti said. "Of all the Jedi alive today, I'm sure I knew him best. I'm certain he passed that attitude on to Komara, whether she knows it or not. I think that's why Komara is where she is now."

Obi-wan thought for a moment; he could sense Shaak Ti's feelings, she wanted to take this line of conversation somewhere. But she was unsure, she was nervous. Seldom had Obi-wan known this wise master to be nervous. "Please," he said, "go on."

"Imagine, for a moment, you're Esera Komara. You're a young knight. Too young to be a knight, really, but the Council needed more Jedi leading armies. Your master was killed too soon, but he left a very powerful sense of right and wrong with you. So powerful that you will go against the Galaxy if you think it's the right thing to do. That's the kind of man Olor Callo was, but his righteousness was tempered by age and experience. You've got none of that, so when the time comes to be pragmatic or stand by your principles no matter what disaster might befall you, you choose to stand. And somehow, I don't know how, they lead you into the service of your enemy's leader. If you were raised to think of yourself as a peacemaker, what would you do, Obi-wan? If you could catch the ear of Grievous, and find out if there really is something more than a rabid monster behind that mask? If you believed you could make a difference from that position, would you?" Shaak Ti's voice had grown impassioned, she looked surprised at herself; Obi-wan had the feeling she'd never voiced these thoughts out loud before.

"If I was naive, idealistic, and gullible enough to think Grievous could be saved, perhaps I would try," said Obi-wan. "The road to the underworld is paved with good intentions, is it not?"

"It is," Shaak Ti said, nodding. "But what if she's right?"

The only possible reaction Obi-wan had was to stare at Shaak Ti. "You can't honestly think that, can you?" he asked her, lowering his voice. "After what he did to you?"

"No, no, that's got nothing to do with-" The Togtura huffed, and straightened out her robes.

She's flustered, thought Obi-wan. *Something must be really under her skin, I've never seen her like this before...*

"Look, Obi-wan, see what I see. Dooku taught Qui-Gon Jinn. Qui-Gon Jinn and Olor Callo were friends. They both listened to what Dooku had to say. Olor Callo taught Esera Komara. And now Esera Komara is in the service of Grievous... who also was taught by Dooku. Don't you see? They're all connected to each other!" Shaak Ti said, her eyes alive with energy.

Obi-wan did not like his master being associated in any way with Grievous, he felt himself frowning inadvertently. "Shaak Ti, don't you think you're reaching with this?"

"On Kalee," she went on, like he hadn't even spoken, "I learned that Grievous is a monster in the eyes of his people, too. They think he's been chosen by the gods, a sacrifice to become their scourge, unleashed upon the Galaxy in retribution for its sins. At first, I thought it was superstition, silly beliefs of a primitive race still riding in wheeled vehicles... But, no. I can't ignore the Dooku connection. All these people are linked together, across time. That Komara comes from a line of thinkers going back to Dooku, and just so happens to end up beside Grievous- I can't ignore that, Obi-wan."

"What are you getting at?" asked Obi-wan, his eyes narrowed.

Shaak Ti looked bewildered. She put her hands on her head. "The Kaleesh are right. This is happening for a reason, Obi-wan. The Force has guided Grievous and Komara to just where they need to be. To what end, I cannot say, but when I look at what the Galaxy has become because of us... I do not like where my mind takes me."

"I don't like it either," Obi-wan said. He put a hand on the Togruta's shoulder. "Shaak Ti, you're overthinking this. Have you taken time to rest since you got back?"

"Yes, I have," she said, exhaling deeply before standing up. "I'm perfectly fine, Master Kenobi. Thank you for your time."

There was no disguising her disappointment through the Force. She'd come to him hoping he wouldn't call her crazy, that he'd tell her she was onto something. *Maybe assigning her to look into Grievous was a mistake,* he thought. Obi-wan went into the Temple, seeking to have a word with Mace Windu and Yoda about this very worrisome idea in Shaak Ti's head.

"We are emerging from hyperspace, Captain," announced the droid commander.

The blue tunnel of hyperspace receded, and stars streaked back into existence. Zeltros zoomed up on *Encounter* as the ship de-accelerated. The dark seas contrasted with the vast golden grasslands and green forests covering much of the continents. "And here we are," said Esera, though the droids didn't answer. She made an announcement on the intercom, for anyone going to the surface to meet in the mess hall, where Lieutenant Voyan would fill them in on what to expect.

Voyan's presentation was quick, focusing on local laws and customs that as a diplomat, Esera could break, but which he heavily advised obeying, or at least humoring. He warned them about the Zeltron pheromones permeating the air, while not harmful, they could make one inclined to do things one might not normally do. He introduced them to all the important landmarks of Ibisa, the capital city situated on a tropical coast. There were really two Ibisas: the Ibisa where the tourists visited, sunny beaches, flashy resorts, expensive restaurants, and a dozen clubs and bars per block, and the Ibisa where the Zeltrons lived, a vast sprawl stretching inland, poorer and grittier than the glamorous beach-side districts, but only marginally more dangerous. Voyan was familiar with both cities.

"Zeltros isn't Nar Shaddaa," he told them. "For example, the sex industry is heavily regulated. You're not going to catch any nasty diseases or get drugged and wake up in an organ harvesting lab. You're not going to get away with anything unsavory either. Unless your cafarel consents, at least. The police take those crimes much more seriously than traffic violations or contraband smuggling."

"How do you know all this?" asked Esera. "Are you talking from personal experience?"

"No," Voyan said. "My visits to Zeltros weren't for pleasure. All the insights I have come from... an acquaintance I had there."

Uh oh, thought Esera. *Is this why he didn't like the idea of coming here?* Come to think of it, Voyan had been discontent on the whole journey to Zeltros thus far.

"Cafarels are what, exactly?" asked Xiss.

The lieutenant took a moment to find his words, looking embarrassed. "They're... government-licensed sexual therapists. That's the polite way to describe them."

"We have prostitutes on Skako as well," Murshida spoke, breaking his silent vigil. Everyone turned to look at him. "I was young once too," he told them.

"I don't even want to imagine," muttered Voyan.

"Alright, we're expected on the surface in an hour," Esera told her crew and passengers. "Voyan, get your speeder in the shuttle. Alize, if you're coming along, start packing. Mofuwa, Xiss... be there or I'm leaving you up here. And Murshida?"

"Yes?"

"I want you and the security droids to be ready to get down to the surface at a moment's notice. Just in case things get wild," said Esera. Murshida nodded.

An hour later, Esera boarded the cargo shuttle, and got her first glimpse of Voyan's landspeeder, nestled in a transport cradle. It was a white and angular wedge-shaped little thing, barely more than a meter tall and hardly four meters long. The windows and windscreen were so tinted she couldn't see inside. Oddly enough, the front of the speeder opened up to reveal a cargo trunk, the engine must have been in the back. "Lieutenant," she said, "how many people does this thing hold?"

"Legally, four," he said. "Two in front, two in the back. As long as the two in the back are Toongs."

"Toongs?" came Alize's voice, as she strolled up the shuttle's ramp. Never had they seen her not in her cooking outfit and without an apron; now in a colorful blouse and knee-length skirt, Alize looked every part the tourist. One of her bags was slung over a shoulder, and shaded spectacles hid her eyes.

"You look ready for the beach," said Voyan.

"I haven't had a vacation since I got married, boy, I'm taking one," she said. Alize tried to squeeze by the speeder, but there simply wasn't room. So, she just shoved the whole vehicle and its cradle aside, bumping it against shuttle's inner hull.

"Good grief, woman!" Voyan exclaimed, alarm spiking through him at this feat of strength. "There's delicate machinery in here!"

"Sorry, honey," said Alize, patting the lieutenant's head in a very motherly way. Considering that the top of Voyan's head hardly came even with Alize's mouth, they could have been mother and son. *Well, if they were both the same species,* Esera thought, trying not to laugh at the sight.

"If you knocked my turbine out of alignment..." Voyan trailed off, realizing there was no real threat he could make to a Zygerrian that big.

Mofuwa and Xiss showed up shortly after. The Jabiimi soldier and his charge were dressed in civilian clothes too, bland and unremarkably pedestrian, leaving the two other Humans as the centerpieces of fashion. Esera's and Voyan's Raxian-cut clothes clearly marked them as not the usual visitors to Zeltros. Finally, the magnaguards boarded, along with a compliment of commando droids. The organics packed themselves into the shuttle's cabin, leaving the droids and speeder in the hold.

"Comrade Xiss and I will exfiltrate the space port on our own," Mofuwa said on the way down. "We'll be out after you. When the mission is done we'll let you know."

"I'm not planning on sticking around if I finish my job first. If you haven't dealt with this... *high roller*," Esera said, borrowing Voyan's mysterious phrase, "by then, I'm out of here."

"So be it," said Mofuwa. "We're fully capable of getting back to Jabiim by other means."

Getting to the surface was easy, with diplomatic credentials. Zeltros was formally a Republic world, but so far had kept the war away from its skies and lands. If being amiable to Separatist visitors kept things like that, they were happy to do so. Petitioning the king and queen for an urgent meeting had been very easy as well.

True to their word, Mofuwa and Xiss hid themselves aboard the shuttle where customs wouldn't find them, vanishing into the shuttle's built-in security box, courtesy of the Trade Federation. That left only three people and a bunch of droids, plus a speeder, for customs to see. The Zeltrons were nervous about the firepower Esera had brought, but as she was a Separatist diplomat in what was technically enemy territory, they had little ground to object to her. Their hosts provided a large cargo hauler for her droids. Alize had her own ideas, too.

"If you think you're forcing me into *that* thing," she said, pointing at Voyan's speeder, "you're out of your mind. Besides, I'm on Zeltros, I want the full experience. Being cooped up in some palace isn't my idea of fun."

"You sure?" asked Esera.

"Believe me, Esera, I grew up in the lower city back home, I can handle this place." She gave a wink over the top of her shaded specatcles before departing. Hot and wet air blasted into the cool shuttle bay, the distant taste of salt tingling on Esera's tongue exhilarating after weeks of recycled starship air.

"I didn't even get to tell her we're not going to be in the palace," said Esera.

"Where *are* we going to be?" Voyan asked.

"They're putting us up in some place called Seaside Serenity," she said. "Heard of it?"

Voyan's eyebrows raised. "Yeah, I've heard of it," he said. "They're putting us in the hotel the senators stay at when they're on vacation. This is going to blow your Jedi mind, Captain."

Fun, thought Esera. Her lieutenant freed his speeder from its cradle, activated its repulsorlifts, and pushed it down the ramp into the sweltering tropic heat. *And I thought Zygerria was humid!* If there was any more water in the air, it'd be raining... And if it was any hotter, she'd be melting. A haze hung over all horizons, blurring where cityscape met sky, and mirages shimmered over the tarmac in the afternoon sun. Esera went to join Voyan outside, stealing a glance at the Zeltron spaceport workers. They had safety vests on, which made her smile. Some things never changed.

"Alright, all systems green," said Voyan, as the speeder's doors swung upwards. "It's thirty-one degrees out here, Captain, and eighty-six percent humidity, I suggest we get moving."

"Only eighty-six? It feels higher," said Esera, lowering herself into the tiny speeder. She looked up at the door, unsure of how to close it when it was lifted so high above her. Did she risk using the Force?

"Humidity and heat have a relationship, I won't get into it," Voyan said. "There's a strap on the bottom of the door, by the way."

"Oh." Esera still had to push herself up out of the seat so she could grab the strap and pull the door down. It clamped shut, the turbine behind them whirred to life, and the air conditioning came on. "Why are the doors so weird?"

"I thought they looked cool when I was nineteen," sighed Voyan, as he stared out through the tinted windshield, pain in his eyes.

"This wasn't a plan to embarrass your captain, was it?" asked Esera, as they began to move along the spaceport tarmac, the big hauler full of droids lumbering ominously behind.

"No, Captain," Voyan said. "In fact this speeder has gone without a passenger seat more often than it's had one."

"Really?"

"It was dead weight, I had to go fast. Foolish inclinations of youth."

The conversation lapsed into silence as Voyan drove out of the spaceport; he fell back into the grim mood he'd been in for a while now. Esera, not yet willing to walk into the minefield that was figuring out *why* Voyan wasn't happy, took in the interior of the speeder, hoping to learn something about its owner as he had been ten years ago. At first glance, it'd appeared black on the inside, but now that her eyes had adjusted to the dimness, she saw that it was actually a dark shade of brown. Everything was very clean, there was no dust or trash, or any signs of the personality of the owner at all. This speeder could

have been fresh off the lot. *Am I really surprised? He's probably cleaned out every trace of his old self that he could. Except the doors...* The lights on the displays were all a warm orange in color, and Voyan drove the machine with one hand on the tiller and another on a mysterious pair of levers.

"What do those do?" Esera asked.

"Air brakes, one for each side," said Voyan. "I guess I never lost that muscle memory. You had to be fast on the air brakes for some of the corners around here."

The speeder was so small that the others they joined in traffic all rose above them. Air traffic didn't exist, in order not to pollute the skies with vehicles, so everything hovered just above the ground. Esera had anticipated lanes of traffic, but the Zeltrons drove wherever they wanted. If they needed five lanes, they'd form five lanes, even if the markers on the road indicated there were three lanes only. And the horns! The Zeltrons honked their horns constantly, and Voyan was doing it too, as he watched the chaos through the windscreen with the look of an incredibly bored man. Soon, Esera figured it out: they used horns as a kind of sound-based proximity alert system. On Coruscant, people used their horns out of anger or rudeness; in Ibisa, at least, horns were just a way of letting others know where one was. This was the opposite of rudeness, in fact, it was consideration. Even so, Esera gripped the armrest on the door so tightly her knuckles went white, as a huge tanker cut into their lane with centimeters to spare.

"This is madness," she said.

"This is rush hour," said Voyan, with a yawn. "It's not much further. I know a short cut."

Esera looked back to make sure the hauler was following; it was, and causing a horrible commotion. The droid pilot wasn't using his horn. Esera imagined one of Grievous's magnaguards at the tiller. Then she imagined Grievous himself in this traffic. *He'd have hit every speeder and every curb he saw,* she thought. Meanwhile, Voyan had pulled off onto a side street. He seemed confident, until he saw he'd turned onto a dead end.

"That wasn't there nine years ago," he muttered, glaring at the building in front of them.

"A lot can change in nine years," said Esera. She'd still been in her youngling clan, then.

Voyan lowered his window. "Hey, boys," he shouted at some Zeltron youths relaxing in the shade of an apartment block.

"Hey, Human," one of the boys said back, approaching the speeder. He peered in, glancing at Esera. "If you and your lady are looking for a good time, you might want to wait until it cools off a little."

Esera's face immediately began to burn. This Zeltron couldn't have been older than fifteen! What was he doing, making suggestions like that? But Voyan knew how to handle himself. "Sorry kid," he said, "I'm just her driver, I don't make the call. Can you tell me how to get from Seaside Serenity? It's been a while since I was last in town."

"Yeah, sure," the boy said, who began to explain a labyrinthine route to the hotel. When Esera tried to cross-reference what he was saying with a map she'd found of the city, she knew something wasn't right.

"Lieutenant," she said, when they were underway once more, "none of those names the kid mentioned are on this map."

"Of course not, Captain," Voyan said. "No one from Ibisa actually uses the government names. They had their own long before the city decided to name everything formally."

"Then how does anyone get anywhere if the maps are so wrong?" asked Esera.

"You hire a local to drive you," said Voyan. "Or you drive around, get lost, and ask someone for help. Everyone's willing to help. The first time I was here..." For a moment, Voyan paused, a distant look on his face. "A friend and I brought our speeders here, way back when. Well, I thought he was a friend. We stayed with some Zeltrons who liked hosting aliens. I got lost in their neighborhood so many times that one of the local girls just hopped in and told me the name of every street and landmark we drove by."

"Did she just sit on the floor and hold on for dear life?" Esera asked, remembering how he'd said the passenger seat had seldom been in the car.

"For a few minutes," said Voyan. "Then she decided I was a better seat."

"These Zeltrons are something else," Esera said, shaking her head. The notion of a Zeltron girl sitting in Voyan's lap as he tried to drive was almost as amusing as Grievous navigating this city. "At the Temple they told us never to get into a speeder of someone we didn't know, when we were out in the city."

"Good advice, for Coruscant," said Voyan. "This is a high trust society, Captain. They take things for granted here that you and I have never known. And just when you think you're in... you learn you never had a chance to begin with."

What do I say to that? Esera wondered. *What did he even mean?* Moody Voyan brooding on his mysterious personal connection to Zeltros, just what she feared. She could feel his thoughts again growing dark through the Force, and he was silent for the rest of the drive to the Seaside Serenity hotel.

"I am merely concerned, Master Yoda," said Obi-wan. "Master Ti was saying some very unusual things. I don't think she's lost her mind, or anything, but... this war gets to everyone, eventually."

"Understand, we do," Yoda said.

"Perhaps Shaak Ti needs to go on meditative leave," said Mace Windu. The three were speaking in a private room high in an obscure corner of the Temple, away from prying eyes and minds. "To suggest that Grievous is some kind of divinely-appointed scourge and the Order is his target is ridiculous. She needs to clear her mind."

"A great burden, there is, on all of us," said Yoda, nodding. "Too great, sometimes, this burden can be. Leads to strange places. Dark places. Wanders, the mind does, down these dangerous paths."

"You don't think there's anything to this link she thinks she's discovered, is there?" asked Obi-wan. "I have thought about it. I don't think we should dismiss the Dooku connection. Olor Callo may have been more of a rogue than we thought."

"You don't think Komara actually fell to the dark side, do you?" asked Windu. "I suppose your investigation has turned up results, then."

"Not really, no," admitted Obi-wan, stroking his beard and looking away from the other two Jedi masters. "Shaak Ti gave me some good leads, but I'll need to leave Coruscant to chase them down. But everything I've learned about Komara indicates she... well, she just doesn't have the spine to turn to the dark side. I hate to say it, but she was a pushover while she was here, from everything I've found out. I don't know what Callo saw in her. I certainly don't see the passion and aggression that can lead young Jedi to the dark side."

"Leads to the dark side as well, fear does," Yoda said.

"But it can paralyze, too," Obi-wan countered. "Some people stick their head in the proverbial sand when frightened. They're not the dark side type."

"Perhaps," said Windu, not looking convinced, but before he said anything more, his communicator began to beep, urgently. "This is Windu," he said, to the bald man's hologram that sprang to life.

"General Windu, Generals Yoda and Kenobi," said the man, with a military salute. "This is Director Orlok of Republic Intelligence. The Separatists are doing... something."

"Another attack?" asked Obi-wan.

"No, sir, no," said Orlok. "It appears to be diplomatic. The Senate is too busy voting Tarkin in to office to deal with this, but you Jedi have a reputation for negotiation, right?"

"Before the war, that was what we did most," Windu said.

"A Separatist ship just arrived at Zeltros today," Orlok told them. Another hologram appeared, a destroyer by the looks of it, though Obi-wan didn't know his ships that well. "We've identified her as *Encounter*, a Flight I *Recusant*-class destroyer. Old ship, she was made almost ten years ago." Windu raised an eyebrow, and that got the Director back on track. "Now, Zeltros has no planetary shield, but you wouldn't send a lone destroyer as an invasion force. Only one shuttle went down to the surface. We believe they're going to secure the entire Great Kashyyyk Branch, putting our forces in the Outer Rim in even more of a fix."

"Why would Zeltros join the Separatists?" asked Windu. "They've always been loyal to the Republic."

"Times change," Yoda said, frowning. "Absent for much of the war, the Zeltron senator has been."

"No army has ever managed to hold Zeltros. They've always dissolved into debauchery," said Obi-wan.

"Droids aren't affected by pheromones," said Orlok. "If the Separatists decide to invade, Zeltros will actually have to fight them. But for some reason, they're playing nice. And as a humble intelligence officer, I think we're obliged to meet them there."

"You were just thinking about heading off-world, weren't you, Obi-wan?" Mace Windu asked, the corner of his mouth almost twitching upwards. Obi-wan turned to Yoda, who just looked amused.

"I suppose I was," he sighed. "I'll leave for Zeltros before the end of the day."

This place is something else, thought Esera, looking up through Seaside Serenity's lobby to the glass dome five stories above. Walkways ringed the cavernous void, and above the towers of the hotel stretched fifteen more stories into the sky. The interior was done in white marble, the furniture was upholstered in white, there was running water everywhere, and tall tropical indoor trees stretched up to the light, their green fronds a pleasant contrast to the cold colors of building. The reds and pinks of the Zeltron employees were a stunning contrast as well; of course, they wore white uniforms. Very tight white uniforms, with low necklines, for both the men and women. Esera felt her cheeks warming up. *I've got a bad feeling about this...*

"Ah, Lady Komara, we've been expecting you," said a mustached Zeltron man, appearing from among the employees. "I am Kino Polaza, your host. If you or your companion need anything, *anything* at all, I am at your pleasure," he said, giving a graceful bow. Polaza was not young, but he was a man who took care of himself. He was as trim and sleek and handsome as any of the other Zeltron boys Esera had seen today, and she dared to think the hints of grey in his hair added a sense of experience and maturity to his allure, rather like Harinian Oliniu. *Anything at all, he said, huh? Oh no, stop right there, Esera, you're here strictly on business!* It was too late; her face might as well have been on fire. *Damn these pheromones!* It *was* those Zeltron pheromones already at work, and not just her own youthful vigor, right?

Polaza looked like he meant to say more, but he froze, and Esera heard the clanking of metal feet behind her. Grievous's magnaguards had entered, and took their place at Esera's back. Their Zeltron host stared up at them, at a loss for words. *He's probably never seen any kind of battle droid, before,* thought Esera.

Voyan stepped in to save the moment. "Thank you, Mister Polaza," he said. "Will you show us to our accommodations?"

"Certainly, right this way..."

As high-level diplomats, they were given a pair of suites on the twentieth floor, two of eight such prestigious lodgings. The twentieth floor had its own bar, dance hall, pool, and massage parlor, Polaza informed them. The nearly-silent sigh from Voyan informed Esera that the massage parlor wasn't *actually* a massage parlor. "Who else is on this floor?" asked Esera, as they took the elevator up. "If there's only eight suites and we're in two of them..."

"We keep half of them open, the other four are all but owned by some Ibisa's most..." Polaza struggled to find the right words. "Let's call them socially-successful visitors, shall we? They won't bother you if you don't bother them, and as you're a diplomat, I suggest you don't bother them."

"Are these your *high rollers?*" Esera asked Voyan. Polaza shifted on his feet at the words.

"Most likely," said Voyan, exchanging a look with their host. "I don't think there's anything to worry about, Lady Komara. Seaside Serenity is a prestigious establishment, if they were troublemakers, they wouldn't be allowed to stay here."

Polaza nodded enthusiastically. "Yes, my lady, yes indeed. We Zeltrons are a welcoming people, but the safety and peace of mind of our guests is our highest priority."

"That's good to know," said Esera.

They dropped Voyan off at his suite, where a pretty Zeltron girl was insistently helpful with getting his one bag of luggage into the room. Voyan kept a neutral face, but inside, he was exasperated already. *Sorry, lieutenant, you'll have to put up with more alien women,* Esera thought, giving him a wave as the door closed. Outsider her own suite, one magnaguard stayed on station, while the other followed Polaza in. No doubt Grievous had told them of what happened the last time Esera had been left alone with an older male alien.

But Mister Kino Polaza of the Seaside Serenity Hotel was no King Atai Molec of Zygerria. He was polite, professional, and knew just where to stand so that he was neither in Esera's personal space nor awkwardly far away. His demeanor was so disarming and reassuring that the presence of the magnaguard seemed silly. Clearly, this Zeltron was experienced in using his ability to sense the feelings of others, he was so smooth about it that Esera had momentarily forgotten his race were empaths. In a matter of minutes, Esera felt fully at ease with her host as he explained all the features and functions of the suite and services available at the hotel.

"Now, that about settles everything," said Polaza. "The Palace informed me that you're due to be there at three, tomorrow afternoon. I can have it arranged for you to be woken a suitable time before then, if it pleases you?"

"Oh, that won't be a problem," Esera said. "I basically live on a starship, I'm used to switching up my sleep schedule. I'm lucky, actually, Ibisa time is only five hours ahead of Raxulon time. That's what my ship keeps."

"I see, I see," Polaza said, nodding. "Lucky indeed. I've heard Raxulon is lovely in the winter. You get snow, don't you? I've never seen snow in my life. Well, that's enough from me, I'll let you get settled in now. If you or... uh, your companion need anything at all, you may call me personally. I am the beck and call of the ambassadors of the Separatist Alliance." Again, Polaza bowed.

"Confederacy of Independent Systems," Esera said under her breath as the Zeltron left, smiling as she imagined Voyan's anger. Between beating Xiss in a duel and receiving a very comfortable welcome on Zeltros, Esera was having a good week so far. *So, what's going to go wrong?*

"Does it ever cool off around here?" sighed Ahsoka, fanning herself as they got out of Naka's speeder.

"A few hours after sunset, usually," Naka said. "You came at the height of summer, though. Some weeks, it doesn't cool off at all."

"Great..."

Asajj didn't mind the heat. She remembered the biting cold of Rattatak, the freezing dry red deserts and icy red mountains. Red, red, red, that's all that place had been, besides cold. The only red things here were the people. *Zeltros or Rattatak? Give me Zeltros any day.*

"At least your friend is happy," said Naka. "Be more like her, Ahsoka!"

"Happy is a strong word," Asajj said. "I just don't like the cold."

"Never been cold. Never even had a jacket," Naka said, grinning. "Ibisa is hot, always! That's why we're the gem of the Galaxy!"

The three walked through the back lot of Seaside Serenity, where the valets parked all the speeders of the guests who'd brought their own. *There's a lot of money parked here,* thought Asajj, noticing models that would not have been out of place on Coruscant's highest levels. Two did not look like they belonged with Coruscant's elite, though. One was a large hauler, basic and cheap, it bore no markings. The other was a tiny little wedge of a speeder, with identification hailing from Druckenwell of all planets. *Last I heard,* she thought, *that place was a bombed-out war zone... What's a Druckenwellian doing here?*

"Speaking of gems, look at this!" said Naka, hopping over to the very speeder that had caught Asajj's eyes. "Do you know what this is?"

"A misshaped block of cheese?" asked Ahsoka, not impressed.

"This is an LTR-11," Naka told them, like that meant anything. "Locally-built Druckenwell landspeeder, see the tags? You don't see these things out in the Galaxy often. Remember that stubborn guy I mentioned earlier? He drove one of these. It was white, just like this one!"

"Maybe it's his," said Asajj, crossing her arms. "Was he a Druckenwellian?"

"Nah, he was from Lirra, out in Hutt Space, he just studied on Druckenwell," said Naka. She stared at the speeder, he bubbly demeanor fading away into concern, and something more. *Shame? Guilt?* Asajj watched the Zeltron girl closely. "It looks *exactly* like his speeder," she said. "This is really weirding me out."

"It's a small galaxy," Ahsoka said, looking to the hotel's doors, eager to escape the heat.

"It can't be, though," said Naka, peering into the speeder's heavily tinted windows. "It's got a passenger seat, he hated putting that thing in." She stood up straight, frowning at the vehicle. "Besides, the guy joined the Trade Federation fleet, like, eight years ago."

"If it's any consolation, he's probably dead by now," said Asajj, putting her hand on the Zeltron's shoulder. "Anyone who joins the Trade Federation is too dumb to live."

"Uh, thanks?" Naka blinked and shook her head, regaining her happy face, though it was obvious to both Force-sensitives that she wasn't totally alright. "Alright, alright, enough reminiscing. Let's get inside, Ahsoka's melting. How about a cold drink?"

"I thought you'd never ask," said Ahsoka.

Asajj wondered just why a Druckenwellian speeder had shaken Naka so much. *She's got a history with this Trade Federation guy, something she's not proud of,* thought Asajj. *Hopefully, it's just a scare... but since nothing is ever easy, let's assume this Trade Federation goon really is back from the past and here in this very hotel.* Never had she heard of the planet Lirra before, but Hutt Space meant this mystery man was likely some kind of rough-and-tumble thug. The kind of scum the Trade Federation would hire. *Did he hurt her?* Asajj wondered, recalling the mixed feelings she'd sensed in the Zeltron girl. She barely knew Naka, but she did like the girl's enthusiasm for weaponry and machines. *Well, if this Federation goon crosses paths with her, I'll teach him a lesson or two,* Asajj decided.

Yes, this vacation on Zeltros was going to be very fun indeed.

Author's notes: To quote scripture, "This is where the fun begins!" (Gospel of Anakin, 3:25)

I'll be real, keeping the Zeltros arc rated T will be a struggle. Thus, Alize has had to temporarily depart Esera's point of view, lest the story gain an additional maturity rating. But what can you expect from a planet based on parties, intoxicants, and carnal pleasure? I'm sure you'd all love to see a rated M ASD, things could get very spicy, but I can't show you any spicy things without being exiled to the wasteland of M that can't be found by default. Very sad, low energy, many such cases. Also, I had to cut another Grievous scene from this chapter, so we'll take a look at the strategic and political situation next time. It's the cost of keeping these updates under 10k words.

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